

comic theater.

Woody Allen's "Central Park West" is another relationship play that showcases Linda Lavin's superb acting talents. Visiting her friend Phyllis (played by Debra Monk) in her West Side apartment—a decorated living room festooned with the obligatory African sculpture—she appears as a bourgeois matron named Carol in a blond wig and yellow Bloomingdale's cloth coat, looking like a cross between Barbara Walters and Kitty Carlisle. Someone has been sleeping with Phyllis's husband, Sam (Paul Guilfoyle), and Phyllis is ready for divorce. (Sam has agreed to keep paying for her *Sunday Times*, though that was not part of the nuptial agreement.)

Inevitably, it is revealed that Sam's lover is Carol, which Phyllis knew all along ("You're the all-American whore—they should put your diaphragm in the Smithsonian"). Carol protests that "It's sensual, yes, but it's more—we share feelings and dreams." But after Carol has confessed to her nerdy husband Harry (Gerry Becker) her plan to marry Sam, Sam himself reveals that he has fallen in love with a young actress and abandons Carol. ("Sometimes there's God so quickly," says the vengeful Phyllis.)

"Central Park West" is loaded with (very funny) one-liners, as well as heavy autobiographical baggage. But it never transcends its form to become a real satire on vacuous and bored wife-swappers, possibly because the dramatist is a member of that class; he is not on the outside looking in. But at its best, the play evokes the incisive wit that we associate with an earlier, more confident age of satire, and it is an occasion for superb ensemble work. Simply to watch the way Lavin flutters her hands constitutes a master class in great comic acting.

I have little room and even less stomach to review Nicky Silver's *Raised in Captivity* (The Vineyard Theater). I'll simply say it deserves its artificial directing and hysterical acting, because the best way to handle a defective model is to put your foot on the gas and hope nobody notices that the car's a lemon. Apparently nobody did, since Silver is being touted as the legitimate heir of Christopher Durang. His efforts at cuteness owe a lot more to Richard Greenberg and Terrence McNally. *Raised in Captivity* is not so much clever as high-strung, and the AIDS tragedy with which it predictably concludes is just another example of how our theater tries to dignify a shallow evening and inoculate itself against criticism. An anthology of these plays could well constitute a map of the empty-hearted '90s. •

Every American's favorite ancestor.

The Air Around Tom Paine

BY SEAN WILENTZ

I.

Every twenty-ninth of January, Thomas Paine's admirers assemble at his old farm in New Rochelle, New York, to celebrate his birthday and to lay a wreath on his monument. In recent years it has been a small collection of history buffs, freethinkers, quondam socialists and local patriots—a sweet-tempered assembly, but somewhat dispirited in these right-wing times, and aging fast. Even the youth section, on the wrong side of 40, has felt frayed and discouraged, despite the pleasures of seeing friends and listening to soaring excerpts from *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*.

Thomas Paine: Collected Writings

edited by Eric Foner

(The Library of America, 906 pp., \$35)

Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom

by Jack Fruchtman Jr.

(Four Walls Eight Windows, 557 pp., \$30)

Thomas Paine: A Political Life

by John Keane

(Little, Brown, 644 pp., \$27.95)

It was not always so. Beginning in 1825, sixteen years after Paine's death, hundreds of Jacksonian artisans and deists turned out annually for birthday festivities in cities from Albany to Cincinnati. After 1850, immigrant freethinkers picked up the tradition, joined by native-born democrats such as Walt Whitman, who addressed the Paine commemoration in Philadelphia in 1877. Later in the century, however, the Paine cult dwindled, as radicals found more modern heroes to honor, and as the old Enlightenment currents of militant anticlericalism evaporated. Paine would occasionally resurface in rebel circles as a sort of all-purpose emblem of American dissent—among free-speech advocates and sex radicals at the turn of century, among Popular Front Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, and even in one of Bob Dylan's more obscure lyrics from the late 1960s—but on the left in general Paine's legacy faded; and conservative Americans, if they recalled Paine at all,

did so uneasily, mindful of Theodore Roosevelt's characterization of the man as a "filthy little atheist."

Now a mini-Paine revival has been launched, in ways that defy any simple explanation of the vagaries of American historical reputations. In the mid-1980s, one of Ronald Reagan's cleverer speech writers began slipping patriotic snippets from *Common Sense* into the president's major addresses, heralding supply-side economics as a glorious effort "to begin the world over again." Suddenly the stigma that earlier generations of conservatives attached to Paine disappeared; and in the intervening years right-wingers have begun embracing him as a conservative revolutionary—a foe of high taxes and lavish government expenditures, and a prophet of unfettered American free enterprise, his anti-Christian religious writings either forgiven or forgotten. In 1992, thanks largely to support from the right, Congress authorized the construction, with private funds, of a Paine memorial in the District of Columbia.

Very different concerns have stirred interest in Paine among liberal and leftist scholars. For decades, they stressed (and quietly lamented) the "bourgeois" character of Paine's radicalism, as evidenced in his stubborn defense of private property, in his faith in free commercial markets, in his libertarian individualism. Although his writings prickled with class resentments and egalitarian aspirations (so the arguments went), Paine never quite broke through to the sort of comprehensive critique of economic relations that would come during the nineteenth century, above all in Marx. Now, however, with Marxism laid low, with markets and private property vindicated, Paine has come in for a reevaluation. Perhaps Paine's radicalism was not such a dead end after all. Perhaps the metaphysics of the proletariat obscured an appreciation of Paine's deeper political wisdom. Perhaps it is best to ground thoughts of social and political justice where Paine did, in liberal democracy and the rights of man, and not in class struggle and the abolition of alienation.

Specialists in American history have had additional reasons to reconsider

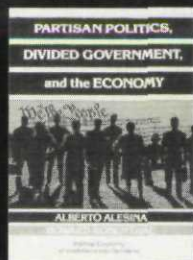
Paine. Over the years, historians have tried to arrange the political ideas of the revolutionary era into an assortment of tidy categories. According to one school, revolutionary Americans divided up into planter democrats and capitalist elitists. According to another school, the basic division pitted egalitarian back-country localists against market-oriented urban cosmopolitans. There are historians who say that the Revolution sprang from classical republican fears of corruption, and there are historians who say that it sprang from Lockean liberalism, and there are historians who charge that the Revolution's democratic stirrings were paradoxically linked to slavery and the myth of white superiority.

Paine cannot be understood according to any of these descriptions. He was a democrat and an egalitarian, but he was neither a nostalgic agrarian nor a narrow-minded localist. He spoke the republican language of virtue and commonwealth, but he was a liberal with respect to individual rights and commercial expansion. His democratic vision was hardly predicated on the subjugation of blacks; indeed, he was an abolitionist well before the term had entered into common American usage. As J.G.A. Pocock has admitted, Paine's writings simply do not fit "any established radical political vocabulary" of the late eighteenth century. Put differently, if we were to judge matters solely from Paine's output (now collected and edited by Eric Foner in a splendid Library of America volume), virtually every major existing interpretation of American revolutionary ideology would collapse.

None of which would be too troubling if Paine were not so important. He was, without question, the American Revolution's most popular and consequential pamphleteer. *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, sold as many as 150,000 copies in cheap editions in its first year, an astounding figure for the time; and it was widely credited for galvanizing pro-independence opinion. *The American Crisis*, Paine's series of wartime political commentaries, was read by troops and civilians alike, and emboldened the patriot effort at some difficult moments. And Paine's influence expanded manyfold when, after his return to his native England, he published his famous two-part reply to Edmund Burke on the French Revolution, *Rights of Man* in 1791 and 1792.

Nor was Paine merely a best-selling publicist. His contributions, political and intellectual, were more profound, changing the very substance of revolutionary politics in an era of democratic revolutions. Reflecting in 1806 on his own long

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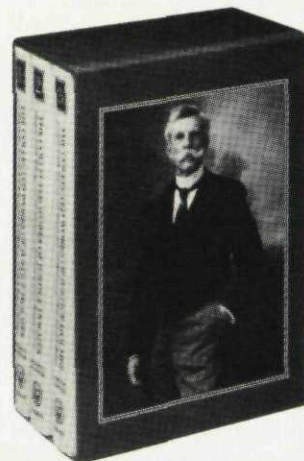
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political career, the aging John Adams wrote curtly, "Call it the Age of Paine." Coming from the conservative Adams, it was an embittered observation; but it was not a wholly unwarranted one.

To be sure, Paine lacked Madison's realism and originality as a political theorist or Hamilton's frightening genius as a financial visionary. In his occasional role as a practical politician, he performed honorably but usually ineffectively. But in his finest writings, particularly in *Common Sense*, Paine defined, better than any other Founding Father, the American revolutionary cause as ordinary patriots came to define it—not as a trans-Atlantic tax revolt or struggle for independence but as an effort to give birth to a new social and political world, a cause for all mankind. Later, in *Rights of Man*, he delivered the most influential defense of democratic principles to appear in his lifetime. And as a delegate to the revolutionary National Convention in Paris, his speeches and articles on behalf of moderation (especially in opposition to the execution of Louis XVI and to the Terror) offered eloquent, if in the short-run doomed, testimony on the necessity for even radical regimes to respect the rule of law.

How Paine wrote was as important as what he wrote. Not that his literary efforts were completely unprecedented. Before Paine, numerous Americans took time off from their usual employments to compose political pamphlets. The modern arts of political insult and satire that Paine practiced so brilliantly had a long history, dating back to the city-states of the Renaissance. (Defoe and Swift were two of the more obvious influences on Paine's style.) But Paine was the first notable American writer to live solely by his pen. And he was the first important American pamphleteer to reach beyond the elite eighteenth-century political nation in order to address directly a new audience of farmers, craftsmen and laborers on the principles of government.

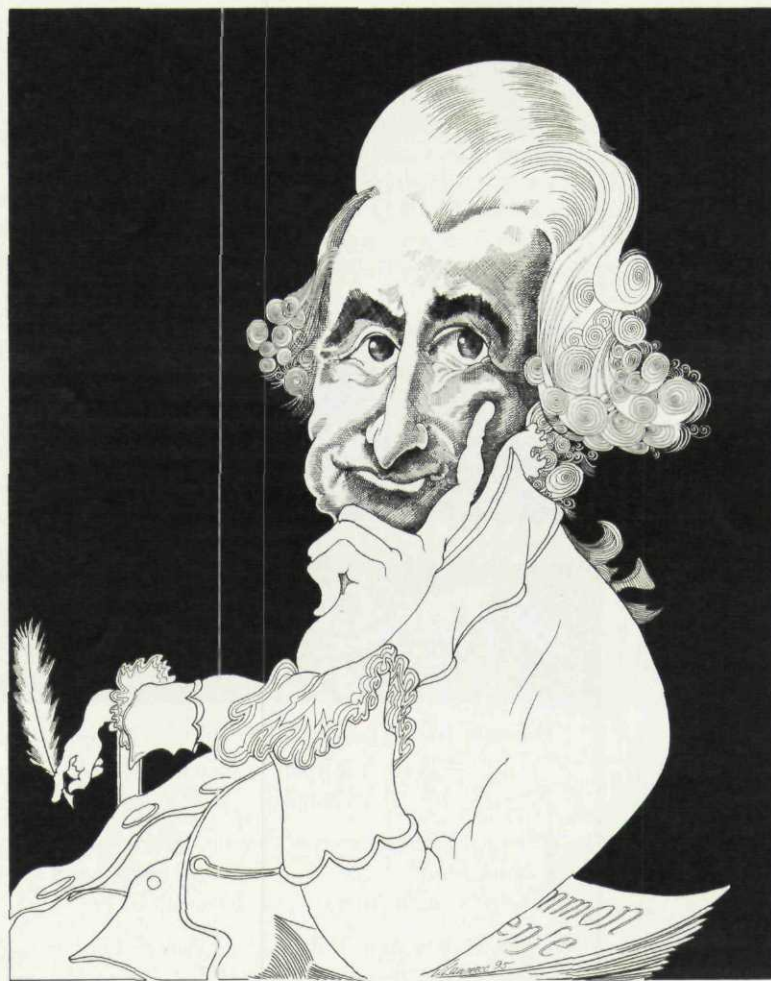
The pithy phrases that still make Paine so irresistible—"these are the times that try men's souls"; "government, like dress,

is the badge of lost innocence"; and (ridiculing Burke's apologies for the French aristocracy) "he pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird"—amounted to a new democratic style of political talk. Anyone could understand it. Its power was inversely proportional to its erudition. As Paine himself suggested, he crafted his style to deflate the verbiage of his pompous antagonists. (Paine on Burke: "How ineffectual, though gay with flowers, are all his declamation and argument.") With its plain metaphors and its limpid logic, Paine's language

Such optimism cut against eighteenth-century Calvinist America's widespread assumptions about human depravity. Even Paine occasionally gestured to mankind's darker side: government, he observed in 1776, was necessitated "by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world"; and twenty years later, in the wake of the Jacobin Terror, he repeatedly remarked on how, without self-limiting constitutions, democracy would degenerate into tyranny. For the most part, however, the freethinking Paine took a more generous Enlightenment view of

human perfectibility, rejecting the prevailing gloomy cyclical interpretations of history while insisting that progress would come from mankind's own efforts, not through divine intervention. Apart from his fellow rationalist Jefferson, no leading American of the era equaled Paine in his belief that, as he put it, "human nature is not of itself vicious," or that men's reason could lead them to transcend their passions and narrow self-interest and make a better world.

Still, Paine was not exactly an Enlightenment Jeffersonian. Although he eventually came to move in some of the highest political circles in three countries (counting among his friends Jefferson, Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, Charles James Fox and, before he broke with them, John Adams and Edmund Burke), Paine spent his first thirty-seven years in utter obscurity, as a humbly born, small-town British corset-



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

implied that the mysteries of politics were not so mysterious at all, that even rude reasonable men could comprehend public affairs and act upon their comprehension. Paine thus opened channels of democratic persuasion that at their worst have inflated clever demagogues (witness the plainspoken Perot) but at their best have inspired some of our finest political leaders, most notably Lincoln, who was a Paine admirer.

Both the style and the substance of Paine's work derived from his fundamental belief in the power of human reason, and his generally optimistic view of the possibilities of human progress.

maker, sailor, shopkeeper and excise officer. When he moved to America in 1774, aided by a modest reference letter from that other ex-craftsman Benjamin Franklin, he gravitated to the world of Philadelphia's plebeian taverns and debating clubs. It was in that world, and not in the drawing rooms of the gentry *philosophes*, that his ideas and his vocabulary took shape. His chief associates were, like himself, self-taught men of the practical arts, whose appreciation of science and reason owed as much to their everyday workshop experiences as to their reading. They were city men, not rural squires (or, for that matter, back-country

yeomen); mercurial men of improvement, commerce and trade, not Jefferson's stolid, self-reliant tillers of the soil.

The difference, as historians have noted, was fundamental to Paine's republicanism. Jefferson, for all his faith in reason and progress, retained some of the classical fear that rapid commercial and material improvement would breed moral corruption and decline. The Jeffersonian vision of a republican empire of liberty was basically a static one, of independent small farmers occupying the vast expanses of the American West, recreating as nearly as possible the pristine egalitarian social order that had supposedly existed in bygone Anglo-Saxon times. Paine's republicanism, by contrast, was thoroughly dynamic and anti-nostalgic. It regarded commerce, like science, as a civilizing force that would help release men from their mental and material fetters; and it regarded history and tradition as oppressive weights to be challenged at every opportunity and, if found unreasonable, to be cast aside.

At the same time Paine's republicanism had a much sharper democratic edge than the republicanism of the Jefferson gentry. In ways that Jefferson and his peers could only imagine, Paine and his constituency felt the enormous and unending condescension of hereditary aristocracy as a matter of personal insult. Those on top (even in America) scorned men like Paine as "meer mechanics" (or, in Burke's notorious phrase, "the swinish multitude"). And yet, Paine demanded, had he and other ordinary men not been endowed by nature with the same reasonable faculties as their privileged betters?

Indeed, he continued, had the productive artisans and farmers of America and Britain not contributed far more to the public good than the well-born ladies and gentlemen who had never produced a thing in their lives? "Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of heaven," he wrote in *Common Sense*, "but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth inquiring into...." Those inquiries constantly led Paine to mock the absurdities of aristocracy, and to proclaim the axioms of what he called "representation ingrafted upon democracy": simple government, minimal government, government beholden to a broad citizenry, government subordinate to society, and not the other way around.

It was the vehemence of Paine's polemics, his utter rejection of the old regime, that most shocked his detractors and most impressed his followers. No previous American pamphleteer had written

as boldly as the author of *Common Sense*:

England, since the conquest, hath known some good monarchs, but groaned beneath a much larger number of bad ones; yet no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honorable one. A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it. However, it is needless to spend much time in exposing the folly of hereditary right; if there are any so weak as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the ass and the lion, and welcome. I shall neither copy their humility, nor disturb their devotion.

Such effrontery was unheard of even in opposition circles, and it sent conservatives into sputtering rages against what Adams called Paine's "yellow fever." Whereas earlier British dissenters (and even most American ones) had hoped to restore some idealized version of a balanced British constitution, Paine called for sweeping away the entire mess and beginning anew, with a wholly republican government, freed from any traces of those "two ancient tyrannies," monarchy and aristocracy. "Lay then the axe to the root," he declared in *Rights of Man*, "and teach government humanity."

Paine was much sketchier, however,

when he discussed the structure of his envisioned republican government. He did outline some fundamentals in *Common Sense*: unicameral state assemblies based on a broad franchise, a national legislature, frequent elections, a written constitution securing individual rights, including rights to property and religious freedom. He also took a hand, briefly, in some practical constitution-making, first in Pennsylvania in 1776 and then in Paris in 1793. And in the second part of *Rights of Man*, and later in his pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*, he devised specific programs to alleviate the conditions of the British and European poor. Still, compared to Madison and the other American Founding Fathers, men who were engrossed with the intricacies of state-building, Paine seemed relatively uninterested in such matters.

Paine's seeming lack of insight was not just a matter of temperament. It was linked to his most basic ideas about republican government, and about what he saw as the intrinsic opposition between government and society. Left to its own devices, Paine believed, mankind was harmonious. Individuals entered into relations with each other in order to fulfill individual desires; the sum of those relations was what he meant by society, a wholly natural and reasonable entity ever

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attentive to the common good. It was government, established by a parasitic hereditary caste—a caste that stood *outside* society—that was the cause of human misery:

Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. . . . Society is in every state a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil.

Madison and the other Founders saw things differently. Society, on their view, was wracked with divisions of class and sectional interest, which republican government needed to balance and mediate. Hence their absorption in the complexities of constitutional architecture. For Paine, however, the major problem was to liberate society from monarchy. Once that was achieved, elaborate government structures beyond a democratic legislature and (he came to add) a judiciary would be unnecessary, indeed harmful. Hence his relative reticence about constitutional details, apart from his insistence that democratic constitutions were imperative in order to keep even the simplest republican governments in line.

II.

Paine's vaunting of society over government helps account for the contradictory nature of the current Paine revival. There is plenty in Paine's writings to encourage latter-day liberals and radicals, from his contempt for privilege and tradition to his humanitarian concern for the poor and disenfranchised (that "mass of wretchedness," he wrote, which had "scarcely any chance than to expire in poverty or infamy"). Since he attacked government as the cause of human wretchedness, however, his writings can be read from another angle, as the precursor texts of contemporary conservatism, including its angrier populist strains. And since he believed that republican America had freed itself from the Old World's political and social vices, Paine often projected a cheerful view of this country as a classless society of *unbounded opportunity* (with "the generality of people living in a style of plenty unknown in the monarchical countries")—the sort of rhetoric that has become an evasive and effective conservative reply to critics of America's enduring inequalities.

The paradoxes and the ironies of Paine's life add to his aura of ambiguity. At one level, he was the archetypal free-booting internationalist radical—a man always in motion, disheveled, prone to drink, consumed by politics. Yet he was

also a determined American nationalist, generally supportive of the Federal Constitution that many of his fellow democrats opposed. In the 1780s, he allied himself with some of America's most conservative financiers, the sponsors of the Bank of North America. Having delivered what remains the most memorable defense of the French Revolution, he wound up paying for his troubles by languishing for nearly a year in a Jacobin prison, where he only barely escaped the guillotine. For all of his celebrated contributions to the Atlantic revolutionary epoch, especially in America, he died a lonely, besotted death in Manhattan in 1809, reviled by many for his impious views on religion.

Making sense of it all is a large assignment, made all the more difficult by the absence of any sizable collection of Paine's papers and correspondence, most of which were accidentally destroyed in a fire more than a century ago. Not surprisingly, most of those biographers who have dared to tackle Paine have stressed a particular aspect of his thoughts and of his career, looking for the key to his mind. (Among the exceptional studies are David Freeman Hawke's dyspeptic but thorough *Paine*, which appeared in 1974, and Foner's *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, which appeared two years later.) And always, for scholars as for speechwriters, there has been a temptation to force Paine's ideas and activities into congruence with more recent political doctrines. Two new biographies, for all of their strengths, suggest that these hazards have not entirely disappeared.

Jack Fruchtman Jr.'s book is the simpler one. It tries very hard to find a comfortable place for Paine within the established eighteenth-century intellectual context. Contrary to Pocock and others, Fruchtman believes that Paine derived much of his thinking from the main lines of dissenting Anglo-American thought, that he ended up concocting a creative blend of classical republicanism and Lockean liberalism. At the same time, Fruchtman contends that the "constant thread" in Paine's work was spiritual, and that it arose from his "underlying faith that God's spirit and vitality permeated the universe." Paine's deist tract, *The Age of Reason*, assumes new importance as the culmination of Paine's religious ponderings and as the most explicit formulation of what Fruchtman considers the "essentially religious character" of Paine's social and political thought. Although taken up with matters of government and revolution, *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* were, it seems, early expressions of Paine's quest for a "higher spiritual

consciousness" beyond oppressive official dogma. Paine's most revealing philosophical links appear, by these lights, to have been his membership in various spiritualist groups in the latter years of his life, including a band of Paris illuminists called the Social Circle, which gathered around Paine's radical friend Nicholas de Bonneville in the late 1790s. Here, Fruchtman suggests, Paine finally made sense of the spiritual longings that had shaped his work from the beginning.

The natural religion that Paine came to embrace was unquestionably a fascinating current in the Atlantic radicalism of the 1790s and the early decades of the nineteenth century, as E. P. Thompson disclosed in his studies of Paine's sometime-associate William Blake. And long before the 1790s, Paine, who had been raised in a Quaker milieu, had certainly rejected Christianity, along with any other set of beliefs based on scripture. (He is reported to have told John Adams as early as 1776 that he viewed "the Bible at large" with contempt.) Still, despite Fruchtman's claims, it remains unclear how much influence Paine's evolving religious ideas had on his political writings, let alone on their popular reception. His most important American pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was actually filled with Biblical references and quotations in support of his arguments that kingship was crypto-papist and ungodly—a bit of dissembling that suggested Paine's primary motivation was to stir the passions and prejudices of his mostly Protestant audience, not to seek a higher religious consciousness. *Rights of Man* contains references to the Creator, but little else that testifies to his spiritual exploration.

Nor, when he finally got around to writing them up, were Paine's unorthodox opinions particularly rich. *The Age of Reason* is marked by Paine's effective slashing, simple style; and as the major text of Anglo-American free thought, it went on to awaken untold thousands of small-town Baptist-belt Americans from an unthinking acceptance of Biblical authority. Yet its engagement with the Bible is remarkably derivative, delivering capsule versions of European skeptical thoughts, a sort of *Reader's Digest* rendering of Volney and Voltaire. Paine became literal-minded and even a bit obsessive in tracking down inconsistencies and falsehoods, blind to the Gospels' metaphoric qualities, handling Christianity as little more than a set of superstitions designed to prop up a corrupt and reactionary Old Regime. Paine, the man of Reason, could imagine a scientific and reasonable Creator, but he was incapable of appreciating the Bible's poetic and ironic God. And, to

add to the irony of his own situation, his criticism of religion seemed completely out of touch with religious realities in the United States, where Protestant Christianity, severed from state power and organized in voluntary evangelical congregations, was turning into a major vehicle for individual freedom and social reform, not aristocratic reaction.

John Keane's book is weightier than Fruchtman's, and it makes some fresher contributions to the historical record. Although there is little in the book concerning Paine directly that Paine's previous biographers have not uncovered, Keane has scoured the British, French and American archives (including some untapped manuscript holdings) in search of the people and events that touched Paine's life. As a result, Keane deepens our appreciation of Paine's context. The book is particularly helpful on what have been, until now, the more shadowy portions of Paine's career, namely the years in England before his departure for America and his decade in France from 1792 to 1802. Keane's description of the young Paine, though it is based on a good deal of speculation, offers a plausible account of how an artisan's son and a denizen of provincial ale houses could have gathered the intellectual forces that later produced *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*. The sections on France dramatically narrate Paine's awakening to the fact that the revolution he had championed was turning into a tyranny.

Keane's Paine emerges as nothing less than "the greatest public figure of his generation" in Europe, England or America. John Adams's remarks aside, it is a judgment that few of Paine's contemporaries would have shared, even when Paine was at the height of his popularity. (In revolutionary America, and even in some European circles, George Washington loomed as the greatest hero of the age.) Still, Keane, who is British and sees Paine in his full Atlantic context, has a point. Paine's immediate impact on his time was far greater than that of any number of his more celebrated English and European cohorts, including, as Keane notes, Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant and (for that matter) Burke.

It was Paine, more than the *philosophes*, who found a popular audience for his unbridled attacks on dogma and tradition. And it was Paine who, as Keane puts it, "pushed and dragged republicanism into the modern world" by democratizing its first principles. Of course, as Gordon S. Wood and others have argued, Paine's achievement reflected larger social and political forces that were in motion well before Paine wrote *Common Sense*—a loosening of traditional bonds,

a growing resentment among the middling and lower classes at any claims to nobility and privilege. But it was Paine who defiantly gave voice to the democratic republican temperament as no one else had, and who then spread his message all around the Atlantic world.

Such a figure, Keane continues, cannot be fully understood by referring to a single aspect of his thought or temperament, or even to two or three aspects. Rebutting Clio Rickman, Paine's English friend and one of his first biographers, Keane denies that Paine was simply "incorrupt, straightforward, sincere." He was a complicated personality as well as a complicated thinker, at once self-effacing and egotistical, sexless and passionate—and a notorious name-dropper who wrote on behalf of the anonymous masses. He did have a few unshakable beliefs—in progress, in Newtonian science and in human reason—but he had no fixed set of opinions. The strength of Keane's study lies in this insistence on his subject's intricacies, which he shows developing by fits and starts over a long and eventful political life.


Yet Keane, in good Paine style, is interested in establishing Paine's living significance as well as his place in history. He has thus written what he calls a "broken narrative," one that bids his readers to consider the relevance of Paine's thoughts today, "thereby encouraging them to tinker with their own sense of reality." A great deal of that bidding concerns questions of politics and economics that have loomed especially large among liberal and leftist scholars and activists over the past several years—the relations between state and civil society, the connection between market society and human justice, the very meaning of democracy.

At their best, Keane's mediations between the past and the present show that many of the questions that Paine posed remain fresh and challenging two centuries later. Paine's distinction between society and government (which Keane, overstating matters, regards as the great original insight of *Common Sense*) can be read profitably as an early recognition of the primacy of civil society in any democratic political order. The social programs outlined in *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice* can be taken, without too great a stretch, as historical grounding for the continuing discussions about the provision of social welfare without debilitating social costs and overweening state bureaucracies. Yet Keane's "postmodern" and "transgressive" Paine also comes across a bit too much like a post-Marxist social democrat (or a post-Thatcher, post-Reagan welfare-state

liberal), looking for ways to square distributive justice with capitalist markets.

According to Keane, Paine recognized in "remarkably modern ways" that "market mechanisms for structuring decisions about investment, production and consumption" are inevitable in any healthy democratic order. Still, Keane contends, Paine also believed that purely self-regulating markets are unworkable without "nonmarket support mechanisms," including direct government intervention. As his main example, Keane cites Paine's support for state government price controls to check the inflation that hit wartime Pennsylvania in 1779 and threatened to bring the local economy to a standstill.

The example is not exactly telling. The Pennsylvania price-control movement, far from "remarkably modern," arose from very traditional assumptions about the duties of a corporate state to provide the populace with foodstuffs and other necessities at what was called a "just price." And, as Keane discloses somewhat confusingly, the impact of the attempts to restrain prices in 1779 proved disastrous, as merchants and farmers held back from the market, causing greater scarcity than ever. Paine's reaction was to renounce such measures once and for all—a "modern" recognition on his part of the limits to effective government power in dealing



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with the fluctuations of the market. Paine would look instead to fiscal reform and to the curtailment of paper-money emissions as the cures for economic turbulence—"modern" positions, to be sure, but ones that in the aftermath of the Revolution fell very much in line with the views of the most sophisticated (and politically conservative) American bankers. Paine may not have been a bourgeois publicist in quite the sense that those words convey today—but his affinities for laissez-faire developmental economics were greater than Keane allows.

III.

What, then, is the legacy that emerges from the current revival of interest in Paine? Are his admirers (and his critics) forever doomed to interpret him in their own image, or to conflate part of his thinking with the whole of his thinking? Perhaps. But there are ways to evaluate even more carefully Paine's continuing importance without elevating him as a beacon for the present. In the crucial work of respecting the pastness of the past, he needs to be set once again alongside his other immortal contemporaries. Jefferson and Paine developed two versions of American revolutionary republicanism; Paine's republicanism, in turn, meshed closely with the ideas of other men who boldly wrote for the ages, but whose visions were circumscribed by their times. In particular, Paine's ideas bear close resemblance to those in another work commonly misread as prophecy, the other great book published in 1776, *The Wealth of Nations*.

At first glance Adam Smith and Thomas Paine may seem an unlikely pairing. Smith, the Oxford-educated Glasgow ethics professor, had some republican and rationalist sympathies, but he was largely uninterested in the political affairs that were the sum of Paine's existence. And on some basic philosophical matters, Smith and Paine disagreed. For Smith, the individual pursuit of self-interest would create the greatest social good. Paine championed the pursuit of reason. Smith saw society as a constant collision of competing individuals that produced harmonious results. Paine saw society as a harmonious whole, held together by recognized common interests.

And yet, as Foner pointed out in his earlier monograph on Paine, the two men's modes of thought were essentially alike. Both thought of themselves as practitioners of Enlightenment science. Despite their differences, they both believed in an underlying accord of human interests. They both defended the primacy of society—and in particular commercial

society—against meddlesome government. They both opposed established institutions and customs such as primogeniture and state churches, which they believed interfered with society's natural workings. They both ripped away at the prevailing traditional systems of authority as wasteful and parasitic, and sought to replace them with a new order of liberty. And they both encouraged new engines of prosperity (such as, in Paine's case, the Bank of North America) to widen commercial opportunities for ordinary men.

But Paine was no more a prophet of modern democracy than Smith was a prophet of modern capitalism. Both men could not help but think of human liberation in terms of a society of small independent producers, where the intensification of commerce would dissolve social privilege, encourage perfect competition and check the growth of glaring inequalities. Paine's revolution, at once political and economic, would, like Smith's revolution, destroy the government racketeers and unproductive classes forever and put in their place the unrefined, industrious common citizenry.

That revolution did not completely succeed anywhere in the world. In the United States, where it succeeded far more than elsewhere, the existence of chattel slavery as a major component of commercial society deeply corrupted (and vastly complicated) the natural workings of democracy; and even after its abolition, slavery's crippling heritage has endured. Moreover, to the extent that the revolution did succeed, it prepared the way for a society very different from anything Paine imagined: a new world of divided political parties, of national and international corporations, a world consisting chiefly not of independent producers but of wage earners and salaried employees, a world of new sorts of connections and patronage and birth privilege, less rigid than the monarchical society of old but hardly a world of perfect competition and equality of opportunity.

The irony, of course, is that the ideas of simple government and laissez-faire that Paine exemplified are now invoked by the chief beneficiaries of this new world (and their political allies) in order to ward off any attempts to interfere with their power—and their bottom line. Worse still, since the mid-nineteenth century, the liberating individualist doctrines of 1776 have been used regularly to cloak a smug and callous disregard for the poor. While reading Paine's words, there is a temptation to turn the tables on this cynical rhetoric, to revive a different usable Paine, the friend of the despised common man, the radical who once remarked (puckishly quoting James I)

that "a rich man makes a bonny traitor."

But not so fast. Paine offers only so much consolation to those who would seek to lessen the political and social inequalities of modern American democracy. In particular, his optimistic view of republican society as a web of cooperation has proven hopelessly naïve. When, in *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice*, Paine dared to broach the divisive politics of property and interest—what Madison called, in *The Federalist*, No. 10, "the most common and durable source of factions"—he did so strictly with reference to the Old World, secure in his belief that the United States would escape such strife thanks to its republican governments. And when, at the very end of his life, he began to notice some growing inequalities in America, he blamed them on Federalist plotters who wished to restore the old monarchy, not on any ills common to republican society.

Yet those ills have existed; and most of the better moments in our democratic history have come about not through the workings of a consensual republican general will, but from the clash of interests. Those interests have been more profoundly antagonistic than Paine imagined, and organized politically as separate interests in ways that Paine would have abhorred. However attractive his desires, however humane his sympathies, Paine's basic principle of republican unity has not stood up well in American history.

Still, there is much to remember and to honor about the man and his labors. His questions, if not always his answers, are of enduring significance. His bustling, forward-looking republicanism helps to put the American Revolution in its full and proper light, as a genuinely radical revolution, a thorough break from the past. His skepticism about received truths, although overly optimistic about human reason, is a powerful antidote to the lure of dogma. For all their ambiguities, Paine's writings did help to change the world forever. They unleashed ideas about privilege, liberty and democracy that have resounded ever since.

Curiously enough, the memorial at New Rochelle sums up Paine's fate quite well, though it does so in the style of the ironic God that Paine could never quite comprehend. The farm site had been given to Paine by the state of New York after the Revolution, as a token payment for his patriotic services. The actual monument, a battered old bust set upon a shaft, stands near the spot where Paine was buried. But there he no longer lies. In the early nineteenth century, the British political writer William Cobbett,

who had been one of Paine's fiercest opponents but later converted to radicalism, arranged to have his remains dug up for transport back to Britain and reburial.

Somewhere along the way, the bones were lost. They were never recovered. So Paine rests nowhere. Or better, he is everywhere. •

Aspic of the Novel

BY JAMES WOOD

A Private View by Anita Brookner

(Random House, 242 pp., \$23)

Anita Brookner's novels are expert copies of nineteenth-century models. They appear once a year, as regular as postage stamps. They are delicate, gloved, malevolent and watchful; but they are also dead, or perhaps posthumous—for they honor their dead teachers faithfully.

Here, for example, is some of the first page of her latest book, *A Private View*, her thirteenth. George Bland, the novel's hero, has gone to Nice to recover after the death of his old friend, Michael Putnam:

He had sought a restorative, conventional enough, after the death of an old friend, Michael Putnam, who had inconveniently succumbed to cancer, just when they were enabled, by process of evolution, or by that of virtue rewarded, more prosaically by the fact of their simultaneous retirement, to take their ease, to explore the world together, as had been their intention. They had waited for too long, and the result was this hiatus, and the reflection that time and patience may bring poor rewards, that time itself, if not confronted at the appropriate juncture, can play sly tricks, and, more significantly, that those who do not act are not infrequently acted upon.

Cut these words and they would ... what? Crumble? This is dust, but superior dust, the carbon of something once fiery. The refrigerated syntax and the moral flounce are directly from Henry James; but note how meticulously the writing mimics a nineteenth-century literary world—or a caricature of one. Nice, that basin of Victorian leisure, predicts for us a classic "literary" geography; Brookner's hesitations ("some forty years ... inconveniently succumbed ... not infrequently") suggest a high-minded opacity; the meditation on "time and patience" promises a novel of classic themes; Brookner's talk of "virtue rewarded" and time's punishments for the sluggish evokes a narrator

of antique moral discriminations. And then, that frail excuse—"a restorative, conventional enough"—thrown in superstitiously, like salt, to protect the passage from just such a charge. Conventional enough, indeed.

This natureless prose is alive only to a world already anointed by literature. So Brookner has always been drawn to the Balzacian stability of apartment blocks, boarding houses and lakefront hotels. Her characters, such as George Bland in the new book, all live in a small area of London fenced on the north by Maida Vale and on the south by South Kensington. Produce is bought at Fortnum and Mason, Selfridges, Harrods; Sunday walks are taken to the National Gallery and the Tate. George Bland lunches at "his club," and when his old friend Putnam was alive, the two used to take tea at what Brookner calls "the better London hotels." Bland and Putnam are known throughout the novel only by their surnames, for no apparent reason except that this, too, is one of those literary conventions. They are like Bouvard and Pécuchet without the fun. The raffish or down-at-heel in Brookner's world live not in genuinely raffish areas, but in the 1950s world we know from the novels of Muriel Spark and Angus Wilson—the shabby-genteel hotels of South Kensington. There is much tea.

A Private View has Brookner's usual plot, familiar to readers of her earlier novels, such as her best-known work, *Hotel du Lac* or *Look At Me*. The frame is Jamesian—innocence confronting corruption. In most of Brookner's novels, a dull and blameless protagonist is almost seduced by an enchanter, who offers a vision of freedom. These enchanters teach that the world is always open to the greedy, the amoral and the uncomplicated. The meek and cowed protagonists—who are often only children, now caring for aging parents—envy them,

agree with their assessment of the world. They are tempted, they waver on the brink of freedom, but finally they crawl back into their behavioral burrows, a little wiser and sadder.

In *Hotel du Lac*, Edith Hope is tempted by the diabolical Mr. Neville, who offers her a loveless marriage contract and promises her that "without a huge emotional investment, one can do as one pleases." Edith decides that Aesop was wrong: in real life, it is never the tortoise who wins the race, she says, but always the hare. The fable exists, she thinks, to make tortoises feel better about themselves. She turns Mr. Neville down. In *Look At Me*, the mousy librarian, Frances Hinton, who narrates the novel, falls in love with a glamorous married couple, the Frasers. She describes herself as a beggar at their feast. Nick Fraser reminds Frances

of the unfairness of life, and excited one with the idea that one might, if he wished, become a part of that unfairness, always reserved for the beautiful, the strong, the imperious, the healthy, the decisive, leaving the meek to inherit the earth or rather to live on the promise of that inheritance.

A Private View is not very different, though it is one of Brookner's deeper and better books. George Bland, as proper and calm as his name suggests, is beginning his sad, if wealthy, retirement in an apartment near Hyde Park. He is a bachelor; his dear friend Putnam has bequeathed him a lot of money, but he has no use for it. His repose is disturbed by the arrival of a garish, selfish, shallow and erotically rapacious young American woman, Katy Gibb, who moves into the apartment opposite his. Bland is at first irritated by her and then enthralled. He falls in love with her, and decides to propose marriage. Though thirty years separate them, it is an arrangement that will profit them both; she needs his money to set up a business, and he needs a new life. Watching her, Bland realizes that a life without scruples is the way to live, for "freedom is to take what one wants, without bothering to cover one's tracks." Unsurprisingly, Katy is uninterested in Bland, and finally abandons him, though not before relieving him of a large check.

There is much that is finely acute here, and Brookner pierces Bland's delusion beautifully. But there is something vulgar about the simplicity of Brookner's vision: the good always lose and retire to lick their moral sores, while the bad always win, thanks to their grotesque health. Brookner herself believes in this unfair asymmetry. In an interview with John

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